

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6346

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 929

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, SY, US, IS

SUBJ: ASAD HINTING ABOUT FURTHER STEPS IN PEACE PROCESS

REF: DAMASCUS 912

1. IN THE MARKEDLY CORDIAL ATMOSPHERE OF ASAD'S THREE HOUR MEETING WITH SENATOR ADLAI STEVENSON FEBRUARY 16, THE MOST STRIKING SUBSTANTIVE FACT WAS THAT THIS TIME PRESIDENT DID NOT HESITATE TO PREDICT PLO ATTITUDES AND SPEAK IN THEIR NAME. (ASAD KNEW THE SENATOR HAD ALREADY MET WITH A SENIOR PLO OFFICIAL IN DAMASCUS AND WOULD THE FOLLOWING DAY BE WITH ARAFAT.)

2. THIS FORTHRIGHTNESS MAY REFLECT HIS UNSPOKEN APPRECIATION THAT HE CAN NOW AFFORD TO INTERPRET PLO STANDS TO OUTSIDERS BECAUSE OF SYRIA'S SUCCESS OF STAGE MANAGING THE LEBANESE CRISIS AND THE INCREASED CONTROL OF THE PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT IT HAS GAINED AS ONE RESULT. IF THIS INTERPRETATION IS CORRECT, WE MAY BE WITNESSING A SHIFT IN ASAD'S OWN APPRECIATION OF AREA POLITICS WHICH WE COULD USE TO OUR ADVANTAGE.

3. THE SENATOR, WHO HAD NEVER BEFORE MET ASAD, LEFT THE MEETING RATHER DISCOURAGED (REFTEL PARA 3). HE TRIED SEVERAL TIMES TO GET ASAD TO SUGGEST HOW TO MOVE FROM THE PRESENT IMPASSE TO AN OVERALL SOLUTION. ASAD NEVER ANSWERED HIM DIRECTLY BUT KEPT REFERRING

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THE SENATOR TO THE JANUARY SC RESOLUTION WHICH HE SAID

GAVE A COMPLETE PICTURE OF WHAT NEEDED TO BE DONE. EACH TIME THE SENATOR SUGGESTED A POSSIBLE APPROACH TO SOLUTION, SUCH AS PLO RECOGNITION OF ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO EXIST, THE PRESIDENT POLITELY REBUFFED HIM SAYING THAT WAS BUT A FURTHER EXAMPLE OF OUR TENDENCY TO PURSUE PARTIAL STEPS. (STEVENSON AT THE OUTSET HAD DISASSOCIATED HIMSELF FROM STEP-BY-STEP DIPLOMACY.) ALL SUCH QUESTIONS, ASAD STRESSED, WERE COVERED IN THE JANUARY SC RESOLUTION. WERE THE PRESENT PLO LEADERSHIP TO TALK OF RECOGNIZING ISRAEL, IT WOULD BE DISMISSED BY ITS OWN MEMBERSHIP FOR HAVING TAKEN A PARTIAL STEP WHICH WOULD BE BY DEFINITION AN UNBALANCED STEP.

4. ASAD DREW A COMPARISON BETWEEN SYRIA'S HANDLING OF THE LEBANESE CRISIS AND THE WAY AMERICA SHOULD APPROACH THE ME SETTLEMENT. WITHOUT GETTING INTO SPECIFICS ABOUT THE DIFFICULTIES SYRIA HAD HAD WITH INDIVIDUAL LEBANESE POLITICIANS, ASAD SAID THAT ONLY BY AVOIDING A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS IN HANDLING THAT CRISIS HAD SYRIANS BEEN ABLE TO SOLVE IT. THEY HAD STUDIED COMPONENTS OF PROBLEM INCLUDING EVERYONE'S DEMANDS AND HAD THEN COMMUNICATED THEIR CONCLUSIONS TO ALL PARTIES ON A COMPREHENSIVE BASIS. MANY FACTIONS HAD BEEN IRRITATED BUT NONE ALIENATED.

5. ASAD WAS UNFAZED BY STEVENSON'S OBSERVATION THAT THE SYRIAN AND PLO ATTITUDE BOILED DOWN TO ACCEPTANCE OF THE STATUS QUO AND THEREBY COINCIDED WITH THE ISRAELI POSITION. THE SENATOR'S FURTHER OBSERVATION THAT THE PROBLEM VIS-A-VIS US POLITICIANS WAS ONE OF THE PLOS IMAGE, WHICH HAD IMPROVED IN THE STATES BUT NOT SUFFICIENTLY, ALSO APPEARED TO MAKE NO IMPRESSION. ASAD STUCK TO HIS THEME THAT IT WAS TIME FOR AMERICA TO COME UP WITH ITS OWN COMPREHENSIVE PLAN IF IT WISHED TO PLAY A CONSTRUCTIVE ROLE. HE SAID HE WAS CONVINCED THE AMERICAN PEOPLE WOULD NOT FIND IT STRANGE FOR THEIR GOVERNMENT NOW TO TABLE AN OVERALL PLAN.

6. COMMENT. PRESIDENT'S WELCOMING ATTITUDE AND CONFIDENT, EQUANIMITY WERE IN MARKED CONTRAST TO OUR LAST GLOOMY SESSION ON MY RETURN FROM CONSULTATIONS IN EARLY JANUARY. AS THOSE WHO HAVE DEALT WITH HIM AWARE,
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ASAD OFTEN PREFERS INDIRECTION TO EXPLICIT STATEMENT. THE GENUINE CORDIALITY OF STEVENSON'S RECEPTION, AND THE TIME THE LEADERSHIP DEVOTED TO HIM, I BELIEVE WAS BASICALLY REFLECTIVE OF THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP'S DESIRE TO GET ACROSS TO US

(A) ITS CONTINUED INTEREST IN A POLITICAL SOLUTION,

(B) IT CONSIDERS THE BALL NOW CLEARLY IN OUR COURT, AND
(PERHAPS,)

(C) WE SHOULD BE TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE CLOUT
WHICH DAMASCUS HAS AND HAS SHOWN IT IS READY TO USE OVER
THE PLO IF WE ARE READY TO MOVE TO A COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTION.

7. SUGGEST DEPARTMENT PASS AMMAN AND CAIRO.
MURPHY

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